

VBH BOT FYI Legal FOIA

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Sent: Wednesday, July 28, 2010 7:35 AM
To: Dolores Trandel
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Subject: VBH BOT FYI Legal FOIA

Think tank's audit finds suburban government websites lacking By Kerry Lester
| Daily Herald Staff
Published: 7/28/2010 12:00 AM

[PHOTO] Hanover Township improved its score by 56 points to more than 70 percent on an Illinois Policy institute audit by adding contact information for elected officials, information about meeting dates, agendas and minutes.

A local think-tank is using unannounced audits to attempt to create more transparency on suburban government websites.

While some entities have used the information to better communicate with residents, others are still digesting how to use the data, if at all, a report shows.

The Chicago-based Illinois Policy Institute this spring began conducting "online transparency audits" of the websites of government entities within Palatine, Hanover, Schaumburg, Barrington and New Trier township boundaries - a total of 69 different municipalities, park districts, school boards, and library districts.

Institute Director of Outreach Brian Costin, who lives within Hanover Township boundaries, said townships were selected based on where institute staff lived.

Each piece of township government had its website quietly evaluated and scored on 10 criteria - including the online availability of officials' contact information, public records, budgets, financial audits, taxes, salaries and benefits.

Between May 24 and June 2, Costin said, institute staff contacted each entity for the first time after its audit was completed to talk about the score - and ways it could be improved upon before a second audit was conducted six weeks later.

Second audit results were encouraging in some cases, Costin said, but disappointing in others.

"Some were willing to work with us on it. Others ignored it," he said. "But when people decided they wanted to do transparency, we found they rapidly, rapidly achieved higher scores."

Schaumburg Township, the 18 entities surveyed together raised their average score to 39 percent from 23.

By creating a web page where school fees were listed in one place, uploading more school board contact numbers and budget information, Schaumburg Elementary District 54 was able to move from a 37.75 score in the first round to 90 points in the second.

"From our perspective, we pride ourselves on being transparent," spokeswoman Terri McHugh said. "While we weren't mandated to comply with this (think-tank's audit), we felt they did have some good suggestions."

McHugh said much of the transparency improvement work was done within a couple days, and didn't cost anything besides staff time.

Hanover Township, too, Costin said, improved its score by 56 points to more than 70 percent by adding contact information for elected officials, information about meeting dates, agendas and minutes.

That wasn't the case everywhere.

As a whole, Palatine and Hanover townships each had only one entity earn more than a 55 percent score.

Elgin's Gail Borden Library, located in Hanover Township, earned a score of 20.75 in both rounds. Officials there said they learned of the results of both audits only on July 20.

"We have just received a copy of it, but haven't had a chance to investigate it," spokeswoman Denise Raleigh said.

Barrington Township did not have any of its eight government entities - the Barrington Park District, School District 220, and the area public library among them - earn higher than a 44 percent score in either audit round. Average scores increased just to 24 points from the original 20 points during the six-week period.

Costin called the results in Barrington Township "particularly disappointing," noting the institute "barely heard any responses to our repeated contacts."

Barrington District 220 earned a score of 37 points in the first round, and 43 in the second, just months after it completely overhauled its website.

"We were surprised when they indicated their initial findings," spokesman Jeff Arnett said. "We've gone back and looked at what they identified as potential deficiencies. But based on feedback we've received from constituents, we feel information is readily available. Our financial information, board policies are generally very easy to find."

Still, he said, the district doesn't plan on dismissing the report's data.

"It's on my desk," he said. "We've taken it seriously."

Costin says the institute plans to use results to push for legislation in Springfield that would require local governments of a certain size to have specific features on their sites, using its evaluation criteria as a possible benchmark.

"We're going to be looking over time, auditing to keep tabs on how these communities are doing. We also hope citizens will be able to use this to compare their communities to other communities, and say this is something that I can work on and achieve locally," he said.

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